

ESSAY III.

ON THE APPLICATION OF THE EPITHET
ROMAN12C.

LETTER I.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

A THOUGHTFUL judge of sentiments, books, and men, will often find reason to regret that the language of censure is so easy and so undefined. It costs no labour, and needs no intellect, to pronounce the words, foolish, stupid, dull, odious, absurd, ridiculous. The weakest or most uncultivated mind may therefore gratify its vanity, laziness, and malice, all at once, by a prompt application of vague condemnatory words, where a wise and liberal man would not feel himself warranted to pronounce without the most deliberate consideration, and where such consideration might perhaps result in applause. Thus excellent performances, in the department of thinking or of action, might be consigned to contempt, if there were no better judges, on the authority of those who could not so much as understand them. A man who wishes some decency and sense to prevail in the circulation of opinions, will do well, when he hears these decisions of ignorant arrogance, to call for a precise explication of the manner in which the terms of the verdict apply to the subject.

There is a competent number of words for this use of cheap censure ; but though a man doubts not he is giving a tolerable proof of sagacity in the confident readiness to condemn, even with this impotence of language, he may however have an irksome consciousness that there is wanting to him a certain dexterity of biting expression that would do more mischief than the words dull, stupid, and ridiculous, which he is repeating many times to compensate for the incapacity of hitting off the right thing at once